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Development and validation of a Citizenship Attributional Style Questionnaire

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ABSTRACT

Attribution theory remains popular in the social sciences and often informs education studies. However, attributional style questionnaires tend to reflect the context-dependent character of the theory and existing measures have been found to have poor psychometric properties. Clearly, both issues need to be carefully considered by researchers prior to them applying any scales that incorporate attributional dimensions. Here we report on the development of a reliable and valid measure that applies an attributional style within the context of citizenship. Two separate studies were conducted to inform the development of the Citizenship Attributional Style Questionnaire (CASQ). The factor loadings of eight positive and eight negative events for the internality and stability dimensions were found to range between .41 and .75. The Cronbach's alpha reliability of positive and negative events were found to be .79 and .74, respectively. While CASQ is seen to be a reliable and valid measure, the results also indicate broader psychometric properties than many of the instruments currently used in studies with an attributional approach.

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1. Attribution theory and attributional style measures

Attribution or explanatory theory is a reformulation of the learned helplessness concept (Abramson, Seligman, & Teasdale, 1978), which suggests that people habitually explain the causes of positive and negative life experiences, behaviors and events in a way that cognitively characterizes their personality. Three major attributional styles with three dimensions (internal versus external, stable versus unstable and global versus specific) are seen in the existing literature. In the first, people who have an optimistic attributional style are apt to attribute negative causes to external factors, and positive causes to inter-

nal factors. Second, people who demonstrate a pessimistic attributional style are apt to attribute negative causes to external, unstable and specific causes, and attribute positive causes to internal and stable factors. Thirdly, people who demonstrate a hostile attributional style are apt to attribute negative causes to external and stable factors (Havey & Martinko, 2010).

In order to indicate the relevance of attribution theory to general human behaviors, Heider (1958) remarks that ordinary people are naïve psychologists who make judgments to understand, predict and control the behaviors of others or events. Attribution theory posits that the interpretation of past events has a causative role in the occurrence of future behaviors. The model is not a reason-explanation, that is, rationally explaining why someone did what he did, but rather a complex causal explanation that begins with social perception, attribution judgments,

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emotional response, and ends with behavioral motivation (Crittended, 1983).

Attribution theory has been studied with different variables and in different settings. Among them, a great number of researchers have focused on the relationship between attributional style and depression (Abramson et al., 1978; Harvey 1981; Peterson, Schwartz, & Seligman 1981). In their meta-analysis of 84 studies, Hu and Zhang (2015) found overwhelming support for a relationship between an attributional style for negative outcomes and depression.

However, the question of how attribution style operates in depression has been a matter of methodological issue. Alloy, Abramson, Metalsky, and Hartlage (1988) and Abramson, Metalsky, and Alloy (1989) argued that since depression is a complicated psychological disorder, any model explaining its etiological factors must be able to identify its necessary, sufficient and contributory causes. They provided evidence that it is hopelessness, not helplessness, that yields sufficient condition in the causal chain of depression. In this reformulated theory of depression, depressogenic attributional style which arises from perceived cause of negative events was identified as being a distal contributory cause that increases likelihood of the occurrence of depression symptoms. Given this new approach, it was hypothesized that it is the cognitive vulnerability factor that explains why some individuals, rather than others, are at greater risk for depression after a negative life event (Haeffel, 2011; Haeffel et al., 2008). Some studies provide evidence that event-specific attribution can better mediate the relationship between vulnerability factors and depression (Johnson, 1995; Lynd-Stevenson, 1997). Haeffel (2011) proposed and provided evidence that this mediation role increases to higher level when a person's final cognitive interpretation, rather than the initial one, is assessed.

Previous studies have also indicated that an attributional style is correlated with academic performance (Gibb, Zhu, Alloy, & Abramson, 2002; Houston, 2016; Nolen-Hoeksema, Girgus, & Seligman, 1986); workplace behavior (Smith, Caputi, & Crittenden, 2013); relationships (Bradbury & Fincham, 1990), and sports performance (Hanrahan, Grove, & Hattie, 1989).

The past four decades have seen the development and widespread use of several attributional style measures. The *Attributional Style Questionnaire* (ASQ) developed by Peterson et al. (1982) asks participant to write down causes for hypothetical events and then to rate whether the cause of the event is internal or external, stable or unstable, global or specific. This measure includes six positive and six negative hypothetical events. Hewitt, Foxcroft, and MacDonald's (2004) confirmatory factor analysis of ASQ looked at six negative events, and found support for internality, stability and globality dimensions. The factorial structure of extended ASQ was also supported in some other studies (Joiner & Metalsky, 1999).

The *Cognitive Style Questionnaire* (CSQ; Abramson et al., 1989; see Haeffel et al., 2008) was developed to assess the vulnerability factor for depression. The CSQ uses the same format as the ASQ but the measure was modified to include two additional dimensions, that is, probable consequences and self-worth implications. In order to improve reliability

scores, the number of hypothetical events was increased to 24, equally divided between positive and negative events. The CSQ indicated excellent reliability scores for both the composite score and the individual vulnerability components, ranging from .88 to .96 and .83 to .91 respectively (see Haeffel et al., 2008).

The *Occupational Attributional Style Questionnaire* (OASQ; Furnham, Sadka, & Brewin, 1992), consists of four positive and four negative hypothetical scenarios and has been used to measure attributions in work-related events. The *Academic Attributional Style Questionnaire* (AASQ; Peterson & Barrett, 1987), consists of 12 negative events and was designed to measure students' attributional style in relation to various experiences they encounter in an academic environment. The *Children's Attributional Style Questionnaire* (CASQ; Seligman et al., 1984), is another widely used instrument that was developed to assess the attributional style of children aged between 8 and 13. CASQ has 48 items, half of them positive and half of them negative, and uses a forced choice approach. Lewis, Waschbusch, Sellers, Leblanc, and Kelley tested the factor structure of the *Children's Attributional Style Questionnaire-Revised* (CASQ-R) and confirmed a one-factor solution for negative events and a two-factor solution for positive events.

These measures have been used to produce fruitful research questions and agenda. However, as Peterson (1991a, 1991b) has stated, "both the meaning and the measurement of attributional style have been controversial" (p. 182). Some researchers questioned whether the theory itself has a solid foundation and is consistent across situations (Cutrona, Russell, & Jones, 1985). Part of the reason for these findings is that the reliability scores of existing measures were found to be low or at best modest, and that their validity did not well prove the hypothesized dimensions. Indeed, despite the widespread application of attribution theory, it has been often stated that existing measures have poor psychometric properties (Furnham et al., 1992; Hesslering, Anderson, & Russell, 2002; Smith et al., 2013; Travers, Creed, & Morrissey, 2015). For example, the Cronbach's alpha scores obtained for the *Attributional Style Questionnaire* (ASQ) were found to be very poor for internality, stability and globality subdomains (.38, .21, .53), low for positive and negative events (.44–.69), and modest for the composite scores of positive and negative events (.75, .72). Since the poor reliability problem was essentially related to the existence of a limited number of items in these measures (Furnham et al., 1992; Peterson & Seligman, 1984) subsequent studies aimed to improve these low reliability scores by including more items in the scale. By omitting all positive items and including 24 negative items into the original ASQ, Peterson and Villavova (1988) prepared the *Expanded Attributional Style Questionnaire* (EASQ). The findings of this study proved more satisfactory in terms of reliability scores, with .66 for internality, .85 for stability and .88 for globality dimensions. The Cronbach alpha coefficients of the *Occupational Attributional Style Questionnaire* for internality dimension were also found quite low in some studies, with .28 for positive events and .40 for negative events (Xenikou & Furnham, 1997). In a review of existing literature Smith et al. (2013) indicated

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